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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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A-ONE #1125 06/19/09

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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So, this is supposed to be Spring, just a few days from the beginning of Summer? Where? Maybe in your part of the world, but here in the Northeast it's been cool and rainy for most of the month. I had to dodge between the raindrops this week just to try and mow the lawn! Getting fairly tiresome! But, it is what it is!

With that in mind, there's little to talk about this week. Sure, the economy is still in the dumper, more missiles tested by North Korea, new Iranian "elections", it's hurricane season, and similar wonderful news throughout the world. What more could we ask?

On the plus side, I, and most of all of the employees for the grocery chain that I work, received bonuses this week. A pleasant surprise, for sure. While I feel badly that many are losing their jobs, it's nice to see a company rewarding its employees when the company is doing well. Had it just been the administrators that got rewarded, I would have raised the proverbial eyebrow, but that wasn't the case. So, while my bonus wasn't a huge amount, I'm happy about it.

Anyway, it's been a long and tiring week - again. So, let's get on with another fun-packed week of news and interesting news bits!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. It's shaping up to be an odd summer so far here in the northeast. I'm sure that Dana has mentioned it already, but I've just got to put my two cents in: It's been cooler than normal and very very wet, with more of the same expected for the next several days.

That's very annoying when your lawn just keeps growing and growing. While it's on the bright side today, the grass is just too darned wet to even

try to mow, especially since it’s getting quite high now. I’ll end up having to cut it at least twice to get it down to something presentable now, and I’m not looking forward to it, to be honest. Ah, the joys of home ownership, right?

Unfortunately, there aren’t enough messages in the NewsGroup this week to make a good column, so you’re just going to have to make do with my rants. Yeah, I know, I know. But if you don’t want to hear me rant like this every week, post something to comp.sys.atari.st! [grin]

On another note, I want to mention last week’s election in Iran. There are two or three things that should be noted when considering Iranian politics.

First, while I wouldn’t say that the President of Iran is "just" a puppet, he doesn’t have the power that, say the President of the United States does. He is constrained by one major factor (see the next point).

Second, the true power in Iran is held by the ’Supreme Leader of Iran’, Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Holding both political and religious sway in the Islamic Republic, he is Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces. Obviously, anything he says is by definition both politically and religiously insurmountable by even the ’President’.

So what is the purpose of having a President when the truly important power is held by someone else? I don’t know. I could guess that they feel it gives their government an air of legitimacy on the world stage, or pacifies their own people by making them feel that they’ve got some say in government, but those would just be guesses.

The third thing to keep in mind is that, being a religious construct, the Iranian government seldom feels constrained to follow what we consider democratic guidelines. Everything they do is to further their own ends, not to safeguard the rights of the citizenry.

Since the real power is held and used elsewhere, one might think that it didn’t matter who won the election, but Ahmadinejad is someone they can control more easily than Mousavi. The last thing they want is someone ’bucking the system’.

It seems clear that the people of Iran haven’t gotten the message that they’re still a religious state and are taking their lives in their hands by demonstrating, no matter how peacefully. While they may think that they have right on their side, they have only to look at Tienemen Square. If the government and the powers that be feel that the demonstrators pose a threat to their plans, they will not hesitate to squash them... for the good of the country and glory of Islam, of course.

What get me the most, though, is the conservatives here in the United States who are making a big deal about "rigged" elections in Iran. Evidently, they still haven’t learned that it’s not our job to go busting in and telling other countries how to run things.

I find it at least slightly ironic that the conservatives are the ones yelling, "The people have spoken, and their will is being ignored!" and "He’s not the one most people voted for!" or "Elections shouldn’t be decided by a court or tribunal!".

Ummmm... that’s not what they were saying eight years ago. Funny how things change, ain’t it?

The other thing I want to mention is this flap over President Obama killing a fly during an interview. If you haven't seen it, a fly 'buzzed' Obama once or twice, and when it landed on his arm, he swatted it.

No big deal, right? Well PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) is all up in arms about it. They put out press releases and all that stuff, and I'm sure that a few people are truly incensed about it. But by and large, it's just a fly. Let's face it... there are hundreds of billions, maybe even trillions, more where that one came from.

What I find most amusing, though, is the fact that this puts conservatives (which I've lately taken to calling Republican'ts or members of the G-NO-P), in a difficult position.

Think about it! If you were Rush Limbaugh right now, whose side of this issue would you take? Obama's, or PETA's? [very big grin]

That's it for this week, kiddies. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Recreate Dark Days in History!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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8Monkey Labs Videogame Recreates Dark Days in History

Videogame players will soon get to tinker with some of the grimmest times in history.

"Darkest of Days" due for release in August blends history and game play in a first-person shooter with settings from the US Civil War; the destruction of Pompeii; the Battle of Little Big Horn, and both world wars.

Aaron Schurman of 8Monkey Labs described the videogame as "a wild time travel adventure" while giving AFP a preview of his brainchild.

Players start the game as a member of General Custer's unit trying in

vain to fend off annihilation by Native American Indian warriors in Montana during Old West days in 1876.

Shortly before being finished off by Indians, the player’s character is rescued by "time agents" and recruited to help expose and stop someone that is tampering with history.

Players’ characters dare battlefields and even an erupting Mt. Vesuvius to make sure people who were supposed to survive do and that outcomes of the momentous events aren’t altered enough to change the future.

"We get a chance to take you to some pretty crazy times," Schurman said. "We wanted a game that is the way we feel, or wish, time travel would work."

Schurman assembled a team of videogame industry veterans at 8Monkey Labs to create a title he has envisioned for a decade. Schurman is chief executive of Phantom EFX, which is publishing "Darkest of Days."

The 8Monkey team strived for historical accuracy in game settings that include Pompeii; battles of Antietam and Tannenberg, and a World War II prison camp.

Schurman said the only intentional deviation from historical accuracy was giving Custer a last stand on a hill instead of on an open plain to make for more intriguing game play.

8Monkey engineers built a software engine to accommodate sweeping battlefields, hundreds of combatants, and the chaos of warfare, according to Schurman.

In-game chatter is tailored to whatever languages would be used in those places at those times.

"I wanted people to feel like they are pushed through the time portal," Schurman said.

"There is an amazing twist when you find out who is changing history and why; that’s all I’ll say about that."

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Militants, ’Hacktivists’ Exploit Web, Eye Recruits

Terrorist groups that have long used the Internet to spread propaganda are increasingly tapping the Web to teach Islamic extremists how to be hackers, recruit techies for cyberwarfare and raise money through online fraud, U.S. officials say.

A senior defense official said intelligence reports indicate extremist groups are seeking computer experts, including those capable of breaching government or other sensitive network systems.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence reports about the recruiting, said the extent and success of those recruiting efforts are unclear.

But jihadists' interest in hacking is evident in forums across the Internet. Law enforcement officials say terrorists are branching out into Internet fraud to raise money for their operations.

One Internet forum, the Mujahedeen Electronic Net, offers hacking instructions in a number of postings. A lengthy posting markets a weekly course and limits it to regular contributors to the Web site who confirm they are committed to Islam. The author of the offer claims the course will be taught by "experts in the electronic jihad," according to a translation of the posting.

Last week, U.S. and Italian authorities broke up an international telephone fraud ring that had roots in Italy and employed hackers in the Philippines. The operation is believed to have funneled thousands of dollars to terrorist groups in Southeast Asia.

Italian officials drew a fragile link to Osama bin Laden. They said one of the men charged with financing the hacking scheme had close ties to members of the International Islamic Efforts Foundation, a Philippines-based group linked to an Islamic charity organization once headed by one of bin Laden's brothers-in-law, Muhammad Jamal Khalifa. Khalifa was reported killed in 2007 during a burglary in Madagascar, where he had a sapphire business.

To date, experts say extremists largely have engaged in "sport hacking"; defacing or taking down Web sites belonging to groups they consider enemies, such as sites featuring Shiite, Jewish or Christian beliefs.

"It's more for propaganda value than for tactical value," said Jarret Brachman, a former West Point researcher who is an expert on jihadist groups.

These "hacktivists" prefer to use the electronic media for advertising and spreading their beliefs. Internet sites that promote Islamic extremism abound, as do sites that instruct followers how to build bombs or conduct other types of attacks.

But some recent activity suggests there may be an aggressive push among extremists for expertise such as engineering and technical backgrounds that could be used against the U.S. government or other vital systems.

A senior counterterrorism official, who also requested anonymity in order to speak on the sensitive matter, said al-Qaida is known to seek out followers with scientific knowledge, and computer ability is a logical step.

Adam Raisman, a senior analyst at the Washington-based SITE group, an organization that monitors militant Web sites, said he has seen pitches for people adept at photo or flash video programs that can be used to build propaganda Web sites or take down sites considered offensive.

But, he added, "It's very difficult to gauge what they will do if they

have the ability to penetrate a network and realize the damage they can create."

Brachman described a growing network of people in the U.S. who go online and "cheer from the sidelines. They will never do anything violent, but they have the skill sets to do low-level hacking and this is a way they can play."

The challenge for extremist organizations, he said, is to find those people and then "get them to take the step from being a consumer to actually being an active participant" in the jihad.

Terrorist groups lack the skills to match the abilities of sophisticated governments such as the U.S., China and Russia in launching widespread Web attacks, but they could hire someone who does, Steven Chabinsky, assistant deputy director of cyberissues for the Obama administration’s director of national intelligence, recently told a technology conference.

Reaching out to hackers with equipment and expertise could enable those groups to transmit viruses or worms to take over computers and direct them to send spam, carry out identity-theft or take down Web sites.

Some officials contend that extremists don’t have to take down a critical network or system to have an impact. Even the ability to penetrate and deface a well-trafficked Web site could shake public confidence in the government.

UN Urges Fight Against Hate Speech in Cyberspace

The United Nations has appealed to parents, the Internet industry and policy-makers to join hands to eradicate hate speech from cyberspace.

Addressing a day-long seminar titled "Unlearning Intolerance" on the danger of "cyberhate," UN chief Ban Ki-moon lauded the benefits of the Internet but regretted that "there are those who use information technology to reinforce stereotypes, to spread misinformation and propagate hate."

"Some of the newest technologies are being used to peddle some of the oldest fears," he warned, decrying what he called "digital demonization... targeting innocents because of their faith, their raace, their ethnicity, their sexual orientation."

The secretary general said the Internet industry "can help ensure that hate speech does not proliferate online" and urged policy-makers to "take a hard look at this problem and work to safeguard people while balancing basic freedoms and human rights."

He also stressed that parents have a responsibility to teach their children to safely surf the Internet.

The world body began its "Unlearning Intolerance" series in 2004 with a forum on anti-Semitism and Islamophobia and has continued the program with lectures and seminars since then.

Speakers at Tuesday’s seminar included UN Under Secretary-General for Public Information Kiyo Akasaka, chief security officer at News

Corporation and MySpace Hemanshu Nigam, and Ban’s special representative on violence against children Marta Santos Pais.

Web Support Pours Out for Iran Protesters

Google and Facebook have rushed out services in Farsi. Twitter users have changed their home cities to Tehran to provide cover for Internet users there. Others have configured their computers to serve as relay points to bypass Iranian censorship.

In the aftermath of the disputed Iranian election, Internet companies and individuals around the world have stepped in to help Iranians communicate and organize.

Twitter delayed a scheduled maintenance shutdown so that people could continue to access the microblogging site while scores of Americans set up remote proxy servers so Iranians could access blocked Web sites from inside their country.

All week, Internet users in the U.S. and around the world fixed their eyes on the events unfolding in Iran, the way viewers might have been glued to their television sets 30 years ago. But unlike 30, or even five years ago, this time they could participate.

"Even if we can’t help directly, this is a way of helping indirectly," said Ian Souter, 24, an unemployed computer animator in Lafayette, Ind.

He and other U.S. Web users set up ways for Iranians to access the Internet using Tor, a service that allows people use the Internet anonymously.

Even the file-sharing site Pirate Bay, best known for its run-ins with the law over copyright infringement, has jumped in with the launch of a network that helps Iranians surf anonymously.

Still, it was difficult to tell just how much of this information was accessible to people inside Iran. The government has restricted communications channels, and cell phone service has been spotty. Many sites were blocked and service has been much slower than normal. Even the use of proxies has grown more difficult as the government finds them, and the country’s Revolutionary Guard has sternly warned people against posting objectionable content on Web sites.

Craig Labovitz, chief scientist at Chelmsford, Mass.-based Arbor Networks Inc., said Iran’s telecommunications monopoly has cut back the speed of its Internet connections to the outside world, presumably to increase its ability to filter the data.

The filters appear to target some common ways of evading censorship, including the use of proxies, which allow Iranians to mask sites they are trying to view by having traffic relayed through an innocuous-looking server outside the country. Flash-based video, the kind used by YouTube, is also being stifled, Labovitz said.

One Tehran resident, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of government retaliation, said in an e-mail Friday the government has "filtered Facebook but we use proxy."

"We will protest until they change the results. We hope hope hope," the resident wrote.

It was such protesters that Twitter users like Arik Fraimovich were hoping to stand behind - if only online.

Fraimovich, a 24-year-old man from Israel who describes himself as a "geek and entrepreneur," created an application that lets him and other Twitter users easily tint their profile pictures green, the trademark color of reformist candidate Mir Hossain Mousavi.

Because Twitter is public and easy to use from cell phones, it has proven an effective way of spreading messages to the masses, including protesters. But its free-for-all form also lends itself to piles of unverified information - and spam - spreading like wildfire.

Throughout the week, in an attempt to confuse censors, many Twitter users in the U.S. and elsewhere also changed their listed locations and time zones to the Iranian capital. A show of support, it also made it more difficult to see just how many people were tweeting from Iran.

On Facebook, Mousavi supporters organized protests through his public page and posted photos, videos and messages in Farsi. As of Friday, he had more than 66,000 supporters.

The online outpouring has been "hugely important for letting the wider world feel solidarity with the protesters, and in bringing attention to the issues," said Ethan Zuckerman, research fellow at Harvard University’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society. But, he added, "probably not that important in actually mobilizing people on the ground."

A lot of the information on social sites was coming not directly from inside Iran but from Iranians in the diaspora.

"When we see these movements take over social networks, a lot of (that) is in the U.S.," Zuckerman said. "A lot of this traffic we are seeing is coming out of Iran in more conventional ways, whether that’s Skype or traditional telephone."

With a clampdown on the mainstream media, bellwether news outlets like CNN and The New York Times turned to regular people with cameras to report on the news. The BBC and the Voice of American, meanwhile, added more satellites to broadcast into Iran, which had jammed their signals.

YouTube, Google’s video sharing site, became a de facto news channel about the events. A search for "Iran election protest," for example, yielded nearly 4,000 results on Friday afternoon. YouTube also was directing people to its Citizentube political blog, with frequent updates highlighting clips from Iran.

Late Thursday, both Google and Facebook launched Farsi services, citing the week’s events and the need for Iranians to be able to communicate in their own language.

Facebook, which has been working on translating its site to dozens of languages with help from its users, had more than 400 Farsi speakers submitting thousands of individual translations.

Google, meanwhile, added Farsi to its online translator, calling it "one

more tool that Persian speakers can use to communicate directly to the world, and vice versa."

Though it rushed out its Farsi translator, Google said it had treated the events in Iran as it would to any other major world event.

"People are using our services as intended," spokesman Scott Rubin said.

Earlier in the week, YouTube issued a statement directed at Iran, reiterating that it allows clips depicting violence there and elsewhere because of their journalistic merit. Although it generally bans videos with graphic or gratuitous violence, YouTube has long made exceptions for clips with educational, documentary of scientific value.

Rubin said Google has no way of measuring the amount of material flowing from the protests in Iran. But he called it "ongoing and persistent and an incredibly valuable source of citizen journalism."

While there have been reports of Google's e-mail service, Gmail, being blocked, Rubin said the company has not seen any evidence on its end. YouTube, on the other hand, was getting only 10 percent of its normal traffic from Iran, indicating a block.

In China, where the government has long restricted Internet content, YouTube has been blocked since March.

Rubin and Harvard's Zuckerman sought to dismiss direct comparisons between Iran and China, where Google has agreed to provide a limited version of its search results in order to operate in that country and serve its large and growing base of Internet users.

Unlike in China, where it operates a China-specific Google.cn, Google does not have a domain specific to Iran. This means when people in Tehran want to google something, they go to main, U.S.-centric site, Google.com.

"Iran is very different - they simply block access to most of the platforms we're talking about," Zuckerman said. "There's no option to work with them and make some services available - it's only possible to work around them."

Rights Groups Urge US Laws To Punish Internet Censors

Human rights groups on Thursday urged US lawmakers to revive rules that would punish US firms which help authoritarian governments crack down on local computer users.

The House of Representatives Human Rights Commission heard testimony from groups calling on Congress and President Barack Obama to resurrect the stalled Global Online Freedom Act.

"These past days, the events in Iran have been a reminder of the importance of alternative sources of media in closed societies," Lucie Morillon, the Washington director of Reporters Without Borders, told the Commission.

"Congress should pass the Global Online Freedom Act... as soon as

possible," she added.

The legislation, which would punish US firms for aiding Internet censorship in blacklisted countries, has been languishing in Congress since 2007.

It faced fierce opposition from the administration of former president George W. Bush and some technology firms, both warning it would hurt US business and diplomatic interests in places like China.

Although US firms are prohibited from doing business in Iran, the online battle there between cyber dissidents and the authorities has largely played out on US-owned networking sites like Twitter and Facebook.

As protests in Iran raged this week, the US Department of State said it had asked Twitter to delay scheduled maintenance, fueling the debate over Western technology companies' operations in closed societies.

One version of the proposed law would require US firms to report blacklisted country's requests for information on customers, and allow the US government to block that request.

Similar legislation to limit data transfer is also being considered by the European Union.

Amnesty International's T. Kumar urged Obama to act.

"If his administration fails we will be sad to say that at least on Internet freedom, President Obama's administration will be no better than Bush's administration," he said.

Their comments were echoed by representatives from Freedom House and the Laogai Foundation, a Washington-based group.

Iran has become just the latest crisis to place Western technology firms between dissidents and governments.

In 2004, Internet search engine Yahoo! became a lightning rod for criticism, after it was accused of providing the Chinese authorities with information that led to the imprisonment of one of its customers, Chinese dissident Shi Tao.

In 2005 he was jailed for 10 years and remains in a Chinese prison. A Congressional panel investigating the case publicly pilloried Yahoo! for its actions, with one prominent Congressman describing the firm's bosses as moral "pygmies."

Other firms have been accused of providing filtering software that blocks websites disliked by the local government.

But companies insist they must respect the local laws.

Since the Shi Tao scandal many, including Yahoo!, Google and Microsoft have signed up to the Global Network Initiative, a voluntary code of conduct.

In a statement Yahoo! said it had "learned tough lessons" in emerging markets, and pointed to the Global Network Initiative as a move to thwart "threats to online expression."

"The GNI was formed to help stakeholders in the technology industry uphold the rights of freedom of expression and privacy in the face of pressures from governments to comply with laws and policies that violate these internationally recognized human rights," it said.

In the text, signatories pledge to "minimize the impact of government restrictions on freedom of expression."

EU Calls for US To Loosen Grip on Internet Governance Body

The European Commission on Thursday called for the ICANN Internet body to open up to greater number of countries, loosening the United State's grip over the private group.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) currently operates under an agreement with the US Department of Commerce, which expires on 30 September.

ICANN, a non-profit organization based in Marina del Rey in Southern California, oversees the assignment of domain names - such as .org or .edu - and Internet protocol addresses that help computers communicate.

The European Commission said that when ICANN's agreement with Washington expired, it should become more "universally accountable."

"In the view of the European Commission, future internet governance arrangements should reflect the key role that the global network has come to play for all countries," it said in a statement.

According to the commission, there are currently 1.5 billion Internet users worldwide, 300 million of which are in the European Union's 27 member states.

"Will it become a fully independent organisation, accountable to the global internet community? Europeans would expect so, and this is what we will push for," said EU Information Society Commissioner Viviane Reding.

"I call on the United States to work together with the European Union to achieve this."

The current agreement dates back to the group's inception in 1998 and gives the US government oversight over the body.

Adobe To Charge Users for Acrobat.com

U.S. software company Adobe Systems Inc said on Monday it had moved Acrobat.com out of public beta testing and would charge subscribers to use the online version of its popular PDF reader software Acrobat.

The maker of Photoshop, Flash and Acrobat software said it would charge subscribers for two new services that add capacity and capabilities for intensive business use.

Adobe will charge $14.99 per month for the basic service, which allows

Web meetings for up to five participants and online conversion of 10 uploaded documents to PDF per month.

For the premium plus service, which has meeting capacity for up to 20 people and unlimited online creation of PDF files, Adobe will charge $39 per month.

Five million people have signed up to use Acrobat.com since it was launched in June 2008, Adobe said.

Microsoft Takes on Symantec, McAfee in Security

Software giant Microsoft Corp is launching a free PC security service next week in what could be the biggest challenge to date for anti-virus companies with billions of dollars in annual revenue.

Industry analysts who previewed the service, Microsoft Security Essentials, said its features and quality are on par with anti-virus products from Symantec Corp, McAfee Inc and Trend Micro Inc that cost about $40 per year.

"This is good news for consumers. It’s bad news for competitors," said Roger Kay, a PC industry analyst with Endpoint Technologies Associates.

The product offers protection from several types of malicious software, including viruses, spyware, trojans and rootkits. If its scanner detects a suspicious file that is not yet registered as malware, the program alerts Microsoft researchers for further investigation.

Security companies have minimized the threat from Microsoft. Executives with Symantec and McAfee dismiss it as a lightweight alternative to full protection that they offer in their top-selling security suites.

Microsoft’s offering only fights malicious software. The best-selling products from security rivals bundle in other features such as encryption, firewalls, data backup and parental controls.

Rob Enderle, an analyst with Enderle Group who closely follows the industry, said consumers do not need all those bells and whistles.

"If what is ’good enough’ is free, how do you justify paying more?" he said.

Microsoft said on Thursday that a beta version of the product will be available for download on its website on June 23. The company plans to offer a final version by this fall.

The free service comes after a botched attempt to sell a suite of security software dubbed Live OneCare that Microsoft launched three years ago. It announced plans to kill that product in November.

Disney-Branded Netbook Designed for Kids

Call it "Baby’s First Laptop."

On Wednesday, Asus and Disney launched the co-branded Netpal netbook, also known as the Asus MK90 and MK90H, designed for kids aged 6-12. The Netpal will be available in late July, and will retail for $349.99.

The systems come in Princess Pink and Magic Blue and offer customizable themes that kids can set to their favorite Disney films and characters, including Club Penguin, WALL-E, Hannah Montana, and the Jonas Bros.

Disney's branded netbooks are kid-proof and kid-friendly, and pack plenty of power to boot. The "Netpals" are rugged and durable with a spill-proof keyboard and ShockShield protection that should save data in a fall. More importantly, parents can be confident that their children will be safe, with more than 40 robust parental control options. These include email and browser filters, as well as parental control over email.

The netbooks also come with a sizable software bundle, including Disney-branded media-management software (Disney Mix), photo software (Disney Pix), games, widgets, and more, that all launch from what Disney calls the Disney Magic Desktop. Even the Disney Radio application seems to be a kid-friendly take on Pandora or Slacker, offering streaming audio and song requests. On launch, the browser opens to a number of Disney-branded Web sites.

The netbook runs on an Intel Atom N270 processor, with 1 Gbyte of DDR2 RAM. It includes an 8.9-inch LED-backlit screen with a 1,024-by-600 resolution. The ASUS MK90H offers a 160-GB spinning drive, while the MK90, exclusive to Toys 'R' Us, will have a 16-GB solid-state drive. Otherwise, the systems are identical.

Both feature a VGA port, 3 USB ports, an Ethernet jack, audio-out and Mic-in, a multi-card reader, and a 0.3-megapixel webcam. Both systems offer 802.11 b/g/n and ASUS promises 5 hours of battery life. The MK90H weighs in at just over 2.6 pounds and the lighter MK90 is only 2.2 pounds thanks to its SSD. Both run Windows XP Home.

Orthodox Jews Launch "Kosher" Search Engine

Religiously devout Jews barred by rabbis from surfing the Internet may now "Koogle" it on a new "kosher" search engine, the site manager said on Sunday.

Yossi Altman said Koogle, a play on the names of a Jewish noodle pudding and the ubiquitous Google, appears to meet the standards of Orthodox rabbis, who restrict use of the Web to ensure followers avoid viewing sexually explicit material.

The site, at www.koogle.co.il, omits religiously objectionable material, such as most photographs of women which Orthodox rabbis view as immodest, Altman said.

Its links to Israeli news and shopping sites also filter out items most ultra-Orthodox Israelis are forbidden by rabbis to have in their homes, such a television sets.

"This is a kosher alternative for ultra-Orthodox Jews so that they may surf the Internet," Altman said by telephone.

The site was developed in part at the encouragement of rabbis who sought a solution to the needs of ultra-Orthodox Jews to browse the Web particularly for vital services, he said.

Nothing can be posted on the Jewish Sabbath, when religious law bans all types of work and business, Altman said. "If you try to buy something on the Sabbath, it gets stuck and won't let you."

Cats And Dogs Meet Up Online in Colombia

Not satisfied with social networking sites for humans, a Colombian engineer has launched mypetbum.com, which aspires to become a Facebook for cats and dogs.

My Petbum users can search the site for other pets, get advice from veterinarians or schedule muzzle-to-muzzle or paw-to-paw outings.

"It's an advanced form of interaction: people who participate in the forum do so because they are telling a story," site founder Paul Becerra, an industrial engineer and journalist, told El Espectador newspaper.

Becerra said the idea for a site came after a friend owning a boxer dog whose type is rare in Colombia was desperate to find a partner for the pet.

After the first 500 users signed up in Colombia, Becerra obtained a new server to boost access, with hopes to make the site a regional model.

"In Latin America, there is nothing like this," he said.

Playful Hunch.com Helps You Make Decisions

I'm sick of spending so much time making decisions, like what to eat for lunch or where to go on a date. So lately I've been outsourcing the process to a free new Web service that is happy to do it for me.

Hunch, which was co-founded by one of the people who launched the popular photo-sharing service Flickr, helps you make thousands of decisions ranging from "Am I drunk right now?" to "Which Zelda game should I play?" Hunch asks you several multiple-choice questions to help it hone in on the best advice.

The breadth of topics on the site is pretty limited. The Hunch team seeded it with 500 topics, and users added about 2,000 during a private beta test over the past few months. With this week's launch, users will now add most of the topics.

Hunch is willing to help navigate tricky situations like determining whether you're adopted or deciding if you're ready to get a dog, but I'd be wary of using it as more than a sounding board for serious decisions. Instead I had fun using it for determining what color to paint my nails (yellow) or which vampire movie I should watch (a 2008 Swedish flick

called "Let the Right One In").

Perhaps because Hunch seems so dispassionate and reasoned in its conclusions, it spurred me to do things I've been putting off.

I started by creating my own profile, and telling Hunch about me by answering questions such as which TV shows I find funny, what color my eyes are and whether I know any magic tricks. You can use Hunch without going through this, but the profile can help the site learn about you and give better suggestions.

I asked Hunch to help with fashion and hairstyle issues that I haven't been able to figure out on my own.

First up: Which sandals should I get for the summer?

The site asked how much I wanted to spend, what heel height I prefer and whether I sought a dressy, casual or formal pair. Then it settled on a few suggestions, including a flat, simple, gladiator-style Sam Edelman pair that I really liked.

I clicked a link to check out the sandals on Zappos.com. Hunch makes money this way - it would get a cut from Zappos if I bought the footwear. I decided not to shell out nearly $80 for such a piddly amount of leather and sole, but a bright orange pair was seriously tempting.

Hunch also figured into my attempt to get out of a lunch rut of solely pizza or turkey sandwiches. Perhaps it could steer me to something I was too lazy to visualize.

After questions like "are you in the mood for something healthy or indulgent/comforting?" and "are you eating alone?", Hunch decided I really did want to keep eating pizza. (It also recommended pizza for a co-worker unenthused about the sandwich he had made.)

An extended list showing all the possible suggestions is linked to each Hunch result. It's initially sorted by the site's presumption of what would be most relevant, though you can also view the list by popularity - based on the number of other users who say they like the suggestion.

For the lunch query, Hunch presented 18 suggestions, with peanut butter and jelly near the top. Enticing, but I figured I'd go with pizza so I could use Hunch to make another decision: What topping do I want?

Hunch suggested arugula, but that tastes like lawn clippings to me. Another suggestion, bell peppers, was more appealing, and I was contentedly munching on the slice a little while later.

Because there are plenty of things I know I should do but just don't want to, I used Hunch to motivate myself. The other day, I asked whether I should go running. I've tried (and failed) to persuade myself to hit the pavement by keeping all the running necessities in a drawer right next to my desk, so I was skeptical that turning over my exercising free will to Hunch would work.

It asked me about factors like the weather and the number of days since my last run before concluding that yes, I should lace up my sneakers. I spent the next 35 minutes cursing the site under my breath. Hunch apparently didn't know how out of shape I was.

Fortunately, if you're not happy with the suggestions on Hunch, you can help improve it - by adding your own or editing already published topics after you've "played" at least five topics. Once you create a new topic, other Hunch users can vote on how good or complete it is, and anyone can add questions and results to it. Hunch's staff reviews the submissions before adding them to the library.

For now, though, Hunch's helpfulness is somewhat limited.

I wanted advice on how I should cut my increasingly unruly hair, and the first suggestion was a straight style with long, straight bangs. This would have me looking like a glasses-wearing poodle. The other suggestions - a shag cut, or a bob, like actress Katie Holmes - didn't impress me either.

Another time the site was more than 50 percent sure I should leave work early and grab a beer. This sounded like a genius idea, but since I couldn't find advice on dealing with an angry boss, I stuck around.

City Wants Job Seekers' Social-Network Passwords

One city in Montana wants more than a job applicant's telephone number and address. Along with their job experience, city officials in Bozeman, Montana, are asking job seekers to provide passwords to social-network Web sites and other online groups to which they belong.

Job applicants are being asked to sign a waiver that allows the city to not only check prior work experience, education and credit history, but also to check their social networks, blogs, and Internet chat rooms or forums.

"Please list any and all current personal or business Web sites, Web pages or memberships on any Internet-based chat rooms, social clubs or forums, to include, but not limited to: Facebook, Google, Yahoo, YouTube.com, MySpace, etc.," the application states, according to KBZK, the Montana news station that received a tip from a job applicant.

Bozeman's city attorney, Greg Sullivan, is defending the practice, saying the government has a responsibility to protect the public, and therefore asking for the information is necessary.

"So we have positions ranging from fire and police, which require people of high integrity for those positions all the way down to the lifeguards and the folks that work in city hall here," Sullivan told KBZK. "So we do those types of investigations to make sure the people that we hire have the highest moral character and are a good fit for the city."

Bozeman began requiring the information approximately three to four years ago, when social-networking Web sites became mainstream and popular for people to use, according to Sullivan.

Aside from job seekers having their own privacy threatened, applicants are worried that government officials will also have access to their friends' and family's information, because social-networking sites such as Facebook include a user's list of friends and information about those friends.

To deal with that concern, Sullivan was asked about creating a separate Bozeman Facebook page so that applicants can add the city as a friend, and therefore allow the city to view the applicant’s profile. Officials may explore the option, Sullivan said.

A job applicant’s information is not looked at early in the hiring process, according to Sullivan. Those who become finalists for a position and are made a provisional offer are the only applicants whose social-network accounts are checked.

The request for passwords and log-in information has stirred up a great deal of privacy concerns -- so much so that the American Civil Liberties Union has spoken out against the request from officials.

Montana’s own constitution states that the right of individual privacy is essential to the well-being of a free society and shall not be infringed without the showing of a compelling state interest.

Sullivan agreed that the right to privacy applies to every single person in regard to state action in Montana, adding that the city takes upholding those rights "incredibly seriously."

"What we are doing is essentially balancing individuals’ right to privacy with the need of the city to ensure we have the best employees."

Intel Program Spotlights Dubious Online Claims

Intel has launched software that sniffs out questionable claims at websites.

A "Dispute Finder" crafted by Intel researchers in Berkeley, California, for Firefox web browsers alerts Internet surfers to contentions that are contradicted by information elsewhere online.

"The reason this is important is that very often you’ll read a website and not realize this is only one side of the story," Intel research scientist Robert Ennals said in an online video.

Dispute Finder automatically highlights text containing contested claims and then links to boxes summarizing points and counter-points. The data base is designed to grow and evolve with user input.

Votes regarding the reliability of information are used to filter dubious data.

Researchers reportedly envision a version of the software that will scan caption information in television programs for specious claims and a mobile device capable of "listening" for questionable comments in conversations.

The mini-program, which works with Firefox web browsers, became available Thursday online at disputefinder.cs.berkeley.edu.

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